

The tattoo

In the late spring of 1994, after having sailed over 2700 miles for twenty long days across the Pacific Ocean from Puerto Vallarta to the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia, I decided to mark the occasion by getting a tattoo.

This area of the world supposedly invented the tattoo, which was accomplished by pounding ink into the skin, inch by inch, with a sharp rock and a mallet. I heard stories that after each successful battle a warrior would receive a tattoo, and that when their entire body was filled they could retire.

It seemed to me as if every adult male in the Marquesas had a tattoo, and you could tell if they were left- or right-handed because they inscribed these on themselves. I like the look of these particular designs because they're very graphic and indirect in their interpretation. Just a few lines here or there can signify a fish or a wave or boat. No anchors or names of girlfriends to be found.

The island where I finally got my tattoo was on Fatu Hiva, a small mountainous island, only accessible by boat and a day's sail from the main islands of the Marquesas, which themselves are literally in the middle of nowhere.

After sailing many thousands of miles in the Pacific I'm often asked about two things: storms and Pirates. Much to their disappointment, I have to report that I never ran into either. Long-distance sailing is 99% boredom and 1% sheer terror. On the sail to Fatu Hiva, I experienced the latter.

As it often happened, the trip took longer than I expected and we ended up approaching the island at dusk. When the time came to lower the mainsail and turn on the engine, I quickly realized that the sail was not dropping as it always had when I released the halyard. As you can imagine, coming into a new harbor at sunset with a sail that won't come down is a problem.

After trying all the simple and obvious remedies I came to the uncomfortable conclusion that the halyard, the rope that pulls the sail up, must have come off the pulley that is at the very top of the mast. Unfortunately, I only had steps on the mast up to the first spreaders, about 1/3 of the way up. The rest of the way I would have to be hoisted up using a boatswain's chair, which is essentially a canvas seat with a clip that allows you to be pulled up the mast by a different, working halyard. After climbing into the chair and attaching myself to the rope that would pull me up, I climbed as far as I could and then wrapped myself around the mast while Linda cranked me up with a winch, inches at a time. I'm not very heavy, but still, it's difficult to winch that much weight up a mast, so I would wrap my arms and legs around the mast and shimmy as far as I could while she pulled on the winch handle below. Over and over again I worked my way up the mast, along with the tools I thought I might need, for the problem that awaited me fifty feet above.

I was somewhat used to the rocking back-and-forth of the boat at deck level, but it never dawned on me how exaggerated the motion would be at that elevation. Plus, the fact that there was an extra 150 pounds at the top of the mast added much more to an already uncomfortable motion. In case that wasn't enough, my wife was

vocally terrified for my safety and we were getting uncomfortably close to the island. Oh yea, and the sun was quickly disappearing.

Once at the top, I realized that yes, the halyard had come off the pulley, but it was way too embedded for me to remove it. So I had to cut the rope, thus releasing the main sail back down to the deck. I figured I could go back up and solve the problem the next day with more time and better light. I quickly came back down and we got into the harbor safely, both of us with ravaged nerves.

There is a saying among long-distance sailors that cruising is essentially doing boat work in exotic locations all over the world, and there is a lot of truth to that. The next day I was able to make the repairs and it thankfully never happened again. Back to the story of the tattoo.

As I mentioned, Fatu Hiva is a tiny, mountainous island, the very tip of an ancient volcano that exploded long ago. It's an impossibly beautiful place that looks exactly like what you would picture a tropical South Pacific island to look like. Craggy cliffs that fall directly into the sea and everything is vivid green, as if it must rain all the time. There are two little villages, with a total of about 600 people between them. The natives are friendly yet cautious to these odd, scruffy sailors from all over the world who descend on their paradise a few at a time. Their native language is Marquesin, with French coming in second, and words of English few and far between. They create beautiful wood carvings and "tapas", which are thin mats made from tree bark that they use as a canvas for their unique Polynesian drawings. These they trade for items evidently hard to come by, like large fish hooks, school supplies and alcohol. In church, their songs are hauntingly beautiful, with strange harmonies in minor keys overlapping each other in ways I had never heard before. The biggest surprise was the litter everywhere, as if it were downtown Tijuana. This is something I saw again and again in the South Pacific, only to rationalize it the best I could.

One day we decided to take the dinghy over to the other village. Neither town has what you would really call a true harbor, but this other town had even less options for anchoring safely, with open ocean swells making it difficult to even land our little boat.

It only takes a few minutes to see everything, and you quickly become aware of the fact that they hardly ever see anyone other than their neighbors. They have simple, yet sturdy, single-story concrete block homes, and while admiring one with interesting drawings on the walls, we were approached by the friendly, smiling owner. The husband was the local school teacher, thus knew a few words of English. His wife and kids were right out of the textbook photo of the perfect, handsome Polynesian family. The kids were playing in the yard, while the parents were outside on the patio making wonderful drawings on the tapas "paper" they had recently created. It was the same drawings that were all over the outside of their house, and also on the arms and legs of the husband, permanently inscribed in ink.

They were so pleasant to be around, and obviously so talented, that I took this as my opportunity and asked if he would give me a tattoo. I'm not sure he had ever

done that on another person, but through my few words of French and his few in English, along with a lot of hand gestures, I think I got the idea across.

With just an ink pen, he drew fabulous little characters in a line around my left bicep. There he fashioned a simple, standing rabbit, a representation of a long, thin turtle, and two figures just look cool and fit. He did all this, while still leaving the tender area under my arm untouched. I later realized why.

I really don't like needles and injections, and I was afraid that getting a tattoo would somehow feel like that. It didn't for me. I'm not sure they all feel this way, but mine felt as if someone was scratching the surface of my skin with the tip of a sharp pin over and over, again and again, until it was really aggravating, but not to the point of bleeding. My guess is I won't be talking anybody into getting a tattoo.

I must have really trusted him, because the tool he used was not confidence boosting. It started with a few D cell batteries taped together with a wire at each end leading to an old shaving razor motor that created the vibration. Attached to this was the plastic outer part of a cheap Bic pen, with what I think was an ordinary sewing needle taped on. This was dipped into some sort of ink and then he inscribed the tattoo right on top of his original drawing. And yes, it hurt like hell.

Almost 30 years later, it still looks pretty good, although my skin does not. I don't notice it very often, but when I do, it reminds me of an unforgettable trip, and for that I am grateful.





